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# THE PROBLEM OF THE PERSON- ALITY OF GOD

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Behind the specific problems of the Christian evidences lies a deeper and more fundamental problem, and the answer to it will determine our whole attitude to religion. It is notoriously a difficult problem: I refer to the question whether God is a person. The issue here raised is of paramount importance if religion is to justify itself as a way of life. That God is personal is the working postulate of spiritual religion, the foundation on which the religious temple is built. For the religious relation, as we envisage it, is a relation between persons, between God on the one hand and man on the other. I do not, of course, mean that this holds true at every stage of man's history. The lower nature-religions, for instance, move in the region of a vague spiritism, and their gods are relatively characterless beings. But, except in the case of pantheistic and nihilistic systems, such as Brahmanism and Buddhism, the growing religious consciousness has more and more clearly defined the religious relation as a personal one, the *I* of the worshiper and the *Thou* of the Deity. Prayer and worship, revelation and inspiration, become unintelligible on any other interpretation. If the values which are bound up with these movements of the religious spirit are to be conserved, then the movements in question must refer to and be justified by the reality of a personal God. If you hold that the predicate "personal" when applied to the Deity is only a convenient fiction, or handy symbol to cover human ignorance, the conclusion follows that the main development of the religious consciousness rests on an illusion. And the inference is inevitable that religion, if it is to survive, must be transformed into something radically different from what it has been in the past. The continuity of religious development must be sacrificed.

It has been suggested that this is not necessary. Some modern thinkers suppose that personality may be denied to God and yet a

kind of continuity in religious evolution be preserved. Religion, they tell us truly enough, has passed through certain stages of growth. At a low level deities are sub-personal; at a higher level they are endowed with personality; but even a religion which conceives its deity as one and personal is not final: it belongs to the stage when the religious mind is still a slave to figurative representations and is quite uncritical in its use of images. An old habit is hard to discard, and Mr. Bradley has told us that "we are everywhere dependent on what may be called useful mythology."<sup>1</sup> But these images, though they serve a purpose for a time and have thus a kind of justification, are neither adequate nor really true, and the way of progress lies in gradually setting them aside. One of the images in question is a personal Deity. In future, men of enlightenment will think of God as an impersonal Spirit or an unconscious Mind. So, for example, Von Hartmann has told us.

One might raise the question whether the notion of an impersonal spirit is less difficult and more consistent than that of a personal Deity. Without, however, entering on this matter at present, let us note a current of modern thought, more practical perhaps in its origin but yet tending to the same negative conclusion. The movement in question is critical rather than constructive; its natural issue is agnosticism. Its apostles dwell much on the vagaries and contradictions of popular thinking, and they point out how deeply the ordinary mind is committed to the free and uncritical use of analogies. Man never knows how anthropomorphic he is; he began by reading his own life into things, and he has gone on to fashion his gods in his own image. In a well-known passage Matthew Arnold has informed us that "we construct a magnified, non-natural man by dropping out all that in man seems a source of weakness, and by heightening to the very utmost all that in man seems a source of strength." Following the bent of their fancy men have drawn a confused and inconsistent picture of God, and have invested him with the virtues as well as the defects of a human being. You merely conceal your ignorance from yourself when you project an image of your own personality into the transcendent world. The argument is that we should not pretend

<sup>1</sup> *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 431.

to know when we really do not know, and the conclusion is a plea for agnosticism as the only sane philosophy of life. For what applies to God applies to theology in general. "There is," says Leslie Stephen, "no proposition of natural theology the negative of which has not been maintained as vigorously as the positive." This is a train of thought which appeals to many in these days, and even to some who, ostensibly at least, have not broken with the Christian religion. In men and women haunted by these "obstinate questionings," the religious outlook is darkened by glowing clouds or becomes dim in a feeble and uncertain twilight. It will not be denied, therefore, that anything that can be urged which makes faith in a Divine Personality easier and more reasonable is a real gain to spiritual religion.

At the outset let us bear in mind that nothing will be won by ignoring the difficulties involved or by summarily treating doubt on this subject as a wilful and perverse skepticism. The objectors are often quite honest in the perplexities they feel, and the fair-minded apologist will admit they are not to be disposed of in a high-handed fashion. The argument from authority will not meet their case, and one must try to understand their position. Let it be granted, then, that the use of human analogies in reference to God has obvious limitations and easily leads to contradictions. On the other hand one cannot blink the fact that the idea of an impersonal God or Absolute raises other difficulties of the most serious kind. If the world-ground is impersonal, the emergence of persons within the world-process is a baffling phenomenon for which it is hard to assign a sufficient reason. Moreover, if agnosticism or pantheism is right, the claims of the spiritual values cannot be effectively maintained, and it is not easy to see why they should ever have come to be made. If the Supreme Good is a human abstraction and not a Personal Spirit, the whole system of religious values is undermined, and the whole structure of human faith must ultimately collapse.

In this situation the religious thinker is called on to justify, if possible, his right to speak of God as a personal Being. He must try to give a reason for his faith, if he can. Before we go farther, then, let us be clear as to what we mean by personality, let us under-

stand just how much we suppose is involved in the idea. The term is sometimes used loosely; it may mean self-consciousness simply, or it may denote something more. Yet a deity who is self-conscious and nothing else—as, for instance, the god of Aristotle, who is simply thought reflecting on itself (*νόησις νοήσεως*)—is not all that the Christian means when he says that God is personal. For he implies by the word that God is not only self-conscious but is an ethical Will and exercises a purposive activity. So much at least is involved in the conceptions of divine revelation and divine providence. Now here we have to meet the objection that we are carrying over into the divine or transcendent sphere ideas and activities which have no intelligible meaning save in the mundane sphere. Thinking and willing imply data and limitations, which are present in the case of man but cannot be supposed to exist in the case of God. The objection is definite, and if we are to meet it we must scrutinize the conditions under which human personality develops, that we may decide how far these conditions are essential to any and every form of personality. It may be possible that the human type of person is not a perfect type nor the only conceivable type.

Beyond dispute personality in man is a development within the wider whole of experience. Animals and infants are centers of experience, but they do not exist *for* themselves, and we cannot speak of them as persons. They are individuals, however, for they possess an inner life, and as inner unities they are definitely distinguished from what we call things and from other beings of the same class. Individuality is not personality but it is the pre-supposition of personality; it is on a pre-existing individual basis that a personal life develops. Personality is an enlargement of individuality, or, if you like, it is individuality raised to a higher power. The person has a being for himself. He has a definite character and sphere of action, with rights and privileges and corresponding responsibilities, and he distinguishes himself from and relates himself to other persons. In common parlance a personality denotes a man of pronounced character. A personal life is a life realized in a society of persons, and it is through this social reference that the life of the individual man receives a

specific personal content. The famous ethical precept, "Be a person and respect others as persons" recognizes this social implication.

What then appear to be the specific conditions which make the development of a finite personal existence possible? From what has been said I think we may conclude that a twofold dependence is involved. (a) There is first the contrast to an external world of facts or objects which are recognized to be other than the self. Persons stand over against things. It is the task of the psychologist to trace the steps of this process of differentiation by which the self comes to oppose itself to the not-self. Obviously one of the first stages is the distinction of the body from its environment, the perception that it belongs to the active individual in a way that other objects do not. A further stage is the recognition of the self as an inner center of ideation and desire; and finally we rise to the thought of a pure ego or self which sustains and unifies all its activities. As Professor Ward puts it: "We begin with self simply as an object perceived or imagined, and end with the concept of that object as subject or myself."<sup>1</sup> It is clear, then, that the development of this duality of subject and object is not accomplished by us apart from the contrast of the non-ego, and it is through this contrast that we eventually reach the conception of the self as an inner center which is distinguished from the content of its experience. Were there no distinction in reality the emergence of the distinction in idea would lack a reason. It is by marking off a region of the experienced world as belonging to the not-self that we define the sphere of the self. (b) In a somewhat similar way the self comes to recognize itself as personal in connection with and in contrast to a society of other persons. If we interpret others through ourselves, the knowledge of others also reacts on our self-knowledge. Broadly speaking, we may say that personal and social development advance *pari passu*, and, apart from intersubjective intercourse taking form in language, the individual would never advance to a generalized conception of himself at all. "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." It is especially through the relations, positive and negative, to other persons in a social system that the concept of

<sup>1</sup> *Psychological Principles*, p. 363.

personality as an ethical unity implying rights and obligations is developed. The character and content which are involved in the notion of a person could never be evolved by the self in isolation; its intrinsic resources do not suffice for that.

So far, at least, one would expect general agreement about the interpretation of the facts; the next step, however, raises a question of critical importance. The ego, we admit, comes to a developed knowledge of itself through its relations; but does this mean that the self is a pure abstraction apart from these relations? Some contend that it is so; the relation to the non-ego, they argue, is essential, and apart from it any self becomes a mere fiction. The not-self and the self are as inseparable as, say, the outside of a thing and the inside. And they conclude that the Absolute or God, as the all-embracing Whole, transcends the contrast of ego and non-ego, and therefore cannot be self-conscious and personal. Personality, it is said, is the specific subsistence-form of the finite spirit, and has no application to God who is infinite and absolute.<sup>1</sup> The premises of the argument, nevertheless, may be called in question. We may maintain, with Lotze, that the self is more than the relations into which it enters, and that the ego as in some sense real is the condition of its sustaining relations at all. In fact relations without a *fundamentum relationis* are a sheer abstraction. Moreover, if there were not an original feeling or experience of self, the process by which the self is discriminated from the not-self would lack a basis on which to develop. To put it in a slightly different form, the conceptual process by which the ego defines itself is made possible by the contrast with the non-ego; but the conceptual process only comes into operation because there is a primary and original feeling or experience of self which is the condition of the process.

In his *Microcosmus* Lotze argues in a suggestive way that the function of the non-ego in developing the general consciousness of the self is a note of the limitation which attaches to finite personality rather than the essence of personality. It will serve our purpose at this point to indicate briefly, and in our own fashion, the line of argument.

<sup>1</sup> So Biedermann, *Dogmatik* (1869), pp. 559 ff.; cf. MacTaggart, *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology*, p. 68.

The mark of perfection in personality is internal consistency and completeness: the perfect self fully penetrates, organizes, and owns its content. The finite self never achieves this. It depends for its internal development on stimuli coming from without, stimuli which it often can neither avoid nor control. It is constantly hampered and thwarted by an external environment which it masters incompletely and can but partially transform into a means for its own ends. The body is an imperfect instrument of the soul, and serves only as the basis of an intermittent self-consciousness. It seems to be a condition of our conscious life that there should be regular lapses into the region of the unconscious or the subconscious. Again, man conserves his mental resources for present use by dropping out of memory much that he once knew; in the history of a personal life multitudes of experiences are thus forgotten, and the self, even when it remembers earlier phases of its experience, may lose the power to enter into and sympathize with them. This lack of inner completeness and consistency appears especially in the moral sphere where a struggle goes on between a higher and a lower self, or, in Pauline phrase, between the spiritual and the natural man. This conflict is never crowned by the full and final victory which is presupposed by a perfect ethical self-determination. Hence under mundane conditions the human self never attains to inner harmony, and never perfectly unifies the content of its experience; personality remains an ideal only partially realized. This is what we should expect when we remember that the finite self does not contain within itself the conditions of its own existence. For this reason we cannot suppose that personality in man is more than an imperfect analogy or defective copy of personality in God. The limitations to which we are subject cannot have a counterpart in the Divine Nature, and this is the reason why some prefer to speak of God as supra-personal. There need be no objection to the word, as long as the elements of ethical and spiritual value connoted by personality are conserved in the conception of the Deity.

The crucial question is: With what modifications can we take the category of personality known in our experience and apply it to God? The theistic conception is that of a Being who is ground of



all that exists, but is only limited in so far as he limits himself. God, therefore, cannot be confronted, as man is, with an independent not-self which is the condition of the development of his self-consciousness. But is self-consciousness conceivable on these terms? Here let us bear in mind that even in man an original self-experience was the presupposition of the evolution of self-consciousness. And though the process of development was mediated by the not-self, yet this dependence constituted a limitation. The more a man is conditioned by external facts and impressions, the weaker is his personality. The growth of personality in man takes the form of a development toward internal completeness, unity, and self-determination. The ideal that man strives after, then, in the temporal process of experience must be an eternally complete reality in God. A difficulty would no doubt still remain if we suppose that God is a pure unity from which every element of difference and change is excluded. But this is not a possible conception. The difference involved in self-consciousness falls within the divine nature; it is given in the distinction between the divine self and its changing states. The contrast between the divine and the human ego would lie in the fact that the divine consciousness is continuous and complete in itself, while that of man is broken and dependent on conditions outside itself. The divine self-consciousness would be a perfect self-consciousness, since it is entirely self-contained and self-conditioned, and perfectly unifies its own experience. For the element of dependence on what lies beyond the self, present in the case of man, falls away in the case of God.

Yet there is more in personality than pure self-consciousness. As we saw in the instance of man, it was the practical relations of social life, the interaction of wills in a social system, which developed and gave content to the idea of a person. The concrete conception of personality implies action; and when we think of God as personal we think of him as an active and ethical Will who is ground of both the world of existences and the realm of values. The static idea of God, the idea of a Being resting in the eternal contemplation of himself, is more in harmony with deism than with a genuine theism. To the theist God is essentially active and creative, the living and ever-present ground of the universe which he sustains.

We entangle ourselves in intolerable contradictions if we suppose that God rested in the contemplation of himself for an indefinite time, and then, suddenly quickened to activity, brought the world and finite spirits into being by an arbitrary act of will. It is impossible to conceive an explanation of this abrupt outbreak of creative activity at a particular point in time; for, if the creation of the world meant the realization of a good, then we must suppose that prior to the creative act God was content with a defect of good. The difficulty here is partly due to the fact that we imagine our concept of time, gradually elaborated on the basis of mundane experience, existed prior to the experience out of which it was developed. Augustine, following Plato, sought to obviate this perplexity by saying that God brought time into being along with the world: *non in tempore sed cum tempore finxit Deus mundum*. The truth seems to be that we cannot fit the divine creative activity into our time-scheme at all; the more adequate idea is to think of God as the eternally creative ground of the world and finite spirits. In other words, we must abandon the static conception of God and hold that it belongs to his character to be self-revealing, to actualize his Will in a world of interacting things and persons. In the Christian doctrine of the Logos, and in the recurring thought of Scripture that God is love, there is the suggestion that self-communication is a need of the divine nature. The spiritual and ethical idea of God is not that of a Being who is self-centered but who is self-manifesting. In the case of man ethical personality was developed in relation to a society of persons; the individual personality is enlarged and enriched by the social relations into which it enters. And there is something in the human analogy which is helpful to us here. God as an ethical and spiritual person is manifested in the world of spirits that he sustains and redeems. Apart from this expression of himself in the world of souls that he disciplines and inspires the Divine Personality would lack fulness of meaning and content.

The line of thought that I have been trying to suggest receives support, I venture to believe, from Christian experience. The conception of the personal God in which the Christian rests and finds satisfaction is that of the God who reveals himself in and to

man, whose goodness and love are reflected in the face of Jesus Christ. To justify as far as possible on general grounds the conception of personality as applied to God demands, as we have seen, metaphysical thinking; and against Ritschl and his followers we must insist that theology cannot be divorced from metaphysics. On the other hand Ritschlian theologians are right in claiming that the Divine Personality can only receive its full ethical meaning and content when brought into living relation with the revelation in Christ. But this supreme revelation has its presupposition in that wider activity of God in virtue of which he sustains all souls and works in and through them.

The view here outlined has to be carefully distinguished from the speculative idealism which merges all spirits in the Absolute Spirit and treats them as phases or moments of its life. On this theory finite minds are differentiated from God and one another by standing in organic relation to material bodies; but their being for self is only apparent, and in the end they all fall within the Absolute Mind. In other words religious communion between the human and the Divine Spirit is construed as a process of identification. Though the language of some mystics gives countenance to this idea, it does not truly express the normal religious consciousness, which involves a real element of difference as well as a relation of dependence. The view here suggested is definitely distinguished from this theory by the acceptance of the conception of God as the Creative Will who gives reality to a dependent world and a kingdom of finite spirits. I am far from supposing that the idea of creation raises no difficulties—as a matter of fact we can only think of it through imperfect analogies—but the point is whether any other idea does not raise still greater difficulties. It has been justly said that if, in trying to apprehend the relation of God to the world, “the idea of creation will carry us farther, and if nothing else will, then the idea . . . is rationally justified though it be not empirically verified.”<sup>1</sup>

In harmony with this the divine immanence must always be taken in connection with the divine transcendence. The so-called indwelling of God in man’s spiritual experience cannot mean that

<sup>1</sup> Ward, *Realm of Ends*, p. 246.

that experience is simply God's experience; it does mean that there is an activity of the Divine Spirit making itself felt in quickening and inspiring human spirits. The religious man does not seek to become God; he aspires to a concord of life and will with God.

The personality of God as an ethical Spirit is expressed through his manifold dealings with the great company of souls who owe their being and life to him. And man's response to God is seen in his age-long endeavor to transcend his narrow individual existence and gain a full spiritual and personal life. It is the great Godward movement of souls. The direction of the movement is best defined through the historic revelation in which God's personal character is expressed, for if man seeks God if haply he may find him, God in turn seeks man. It is through the increasing spiritual apprehension of the seeking and saving God revealed in the society of redeemed and upward-striving souls that man advances to the fruition of his personal life. Apart from God, the perfect Personality, our broken and fragmentary personalities cannot reach completeness and fulfilment.